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The National Wildlife Control Training Program

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ABSTRACT: Although state wildlife agencies allow private individuals to perform wildlife control services, only 14 have meaningful and appropriate training requirements for licensing wildlife control operators (WCOs). We developed a training program called the National Wildlife Control Training Program (NWCTP) to cover the fundamental skills and knowledge required by WCOs. This article explains the development of the NWCTP, its content, and the opportunity it provides for states and federal agencies, private companies, and individuals to train WCOs.

KEY WORDS internet, wildlife control, wildlife control operator, wildlife control training, wildlife damage management

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the rapid growth in the number of wildlife control operators (WCOs), the industry continues to lack meaningful training standards and requirements throughout the majority of states in the U. S. (Brammer et al. 1994). In the few states that require WCOs to undergo training, the course usually consists of little more than trappers' education (Oleyar 2007).

Knowledge of trapping is important, but does not cover all of the challenges and issues WCOs confront in an urban context. We conducted a survey of all 50 states in 2011 to determine what training states require for individuals to be permitted, certified, licensed, or perform as WCOs. Twenty-seven states required permits and only 11 required state training, 3 required training by the National Wildlife Control Operators Association (NWCOA), and 13 required individuals to pass an exam.

Though the lack of WCO training is unfortunate, it is understandable. Training materials on wildlife damage management typically focus on a particular species, or

method, rely on dated techniques, or fail to apply to the work of WCOs. In addition, state wildlife agencies simply lack the staff, funds, and expertise required to adapt available materials to create a training program appropriate for WCOs.

We used our 70-plus years of experience in the field of wildlife damage management to fill this need. We realized such a task was both controversial and fraught with many technical and heuristic issues and questions including, "How basic should the information be? How much detail is necessary to both satisfy the needs of beginning WCOs, while being respectful to experienced WCOs?" We intended the training to have broad appeal and capable of being configured to the diversity of state wildlife regulations in the U.S. In short, the project was daunting.

We designed the program, entitled the National Wildlife Control Training Program (NWCTP), using the model of driver's education. Just as driver's education does not create race car drivers, so the NWCTP would not turn participants into experts in wildlife control. The

goal was to teach the fundamentals in a manner that ensured competency. We determined that the ideal training program should: (1) avoid geographical restraints and be suitable for WCOs anywhere in the country, (2) recognize the diversity of activities and complex challenges confronting WCOs, (3) provide essential and actionable information in a succinct fashion to help starting WCOs avoid making a “big mistake,” by performing management actions in a manner that cannot be justified (Schmidt 1994), (4) encourage feedback from stakeholders with the goal of improving the program, and (5) allow the training to be adaptable to agency and company need.

The project progressed rapidly after the NWCOA asked S. Vantassel to assist them in putting together a 2-day training event in Michigan during September 2010. The event was based on elements from the books, *Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage* (Hygnstrom et al. 1994) and *Best Practices for Wildlife Control Operators* (Curtis et al. 2004). Vantassel’s efforts resulted in a series of PowerPoint modules. The first 9 comprised “The Core” and addressed the fundamentals of the wildlife damage management, including theory and principles, physical safety, diseases, inspection, equipment, animal handling, euthanasia and carcass disposal, business practices, ethics, and law. The remaining 5 modules reviewed the biology and control of bats (mainly *Myotis lucifugus*, *Eptesicus fuscus*), raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*), tree squirrels (mainly *Sciurus carolinensis*, *S. niger*, and *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*), and unprotected birds (*Sturnus vulgaris*, *Passer domesticus*, and *Columba livia*). We selected these species for their broad geographic distribution, and the diversity of skills required to manage them.

The Michigan training event was so successful that we proceeded to convert the NWCTP into a book. In February, 2011, we published NWCTP: Preliminary Draft-Open for Comments (Vantassel et al., 2011) consisting of all 9 Core Modules and 1 Species Module (Tree Squirrels). Though individual modules received critiques from reviewers prior to publication (acknowledged at the end of each module), we thought a printed edition of the preliminary draft

would encourage a broader review of the entire curriculum.

In response to reviewer comments and our own reflection on the program, we determined that additional material was required to round out the curriculum. We added 3 modules on trapping, exclusion, and toxicants; along with some minor modifications to other modules. We published the expanded and complete basic training program in February 2012 as the NWCTP: Core Principles and Information (Vantassel et al., 2012). The book encompassed a total of 252 letter-sized pages. The NWCTP consists of 17 modules organized into 2 parts. Part 1 included 12 modules, comprising the core elements of the program. These modules provide information we consider necessary for every WCO to know regardless of their location in the country, including Wildlife Damage Management Theory, Physical Safety, Wildlife Diseases, Site Inspection, Overview of Wildlife Control Methods, Exclusion, Toxicants, Trapping, Animal Handling, Euthanasia and Carcass Disposal, Business Practices, and Legal and Ethical Issues.

Part 2 of the NWCTP applies the core principles to the management of 5 common wildlife species that conflict with humans, namely urban birds, bats, raccoons, skunks, and tree squirrels. These 5 were chosen because learning the skills needed to manage these species easily transfer to the management of other wildlife conflicts. Each of the species modules covered life history, signs, control methods, disposition, and euthanasia of the animal.

Since its development, the NWCTP has received several honors. The NWCOA reviewed and certified the training manual and program, and awarded the authors with Educator of the Year awards in 2012. The NWCTP has received broad exposure having been presented at NWCOA’s annual meetings (2012, 2013) and before the Structure Pest Management Association of Ontario in February of 2013. The State of Delaware was the first to formally adopt the training for its WCOs (April 2013). In addition, we are seeking the endorsement by the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. We have been encouraged by the positive comments from state officials and we look forward to working with them.

A key advantage of the NWCTP is the variety of ways participants can access the training materials. Those unable to attend on-site training events may enroll online at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

(<http://nebraskamaps.unl.edu/productcart/pc/viewcategories.asp?idCategory=709&pageStyle=H>) or at the Integrated Pest Management Courses in Purdue's Extended Campus Distance Learning Program (<https://www.distance.purdue.edu/training/pest/>). Individuals who prefer a self-study format may purchase a hardcopy of the book, and take the test online at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Regardless of whether the training's, face-to-face, distance, or self-study, those who achieve a score of 80 or higher on a 100-question objective exam are eligible for certification with NWCOA.

Some agency staff may question the need for training requirements and certification, as the status quo seems to be working. Our response is multifaceted. First, consumers need protection from unqualified WCOs. Although certification does not eliminate improper work, it does help reduce it. Second, government agencies protect what they regulate. Everyone should remember what happened in Connecticut, when a WCO drowned a raccoon in public view (Hadidian et al. 2002). While completely legal, the action lacked foresight, and the resulting public outrage caused restrictive legislation to be passed very quickly. Thankfully, the law did not destroy the industry in that state, but legislators can act quickly when public outrage is high. All WCOs should be proactive in seeking positive regulations rather than having to be on the defensive against restriction of activities and methods.

Wildlife agency officials may be concerned about the adaptability of the NWCTP to the needs and requirements of their respective states. Though the NWCTP is complete as written, it also is completely adaptable. We can incorporate state regulations both in the NWCTP book and the exam questions. States wanting to include additional species in the training program can utilize our Supplemental Species Information volume (Vantassel et al., 2013). This companion volume contains biology and management for 29 additional species, from armadillos to woodpeckers. Additional species may be added at state or company request.

Readers should not consider either of these publications to be the "final edition." Though substantially complete, we continue to refine their content as well as improve the exam associated with the core program. Anyone interested in participating in this training or in providing advanced training in wildlife damage management should contact us.

Additional information about the training program, volumes, and wildlife species can be found online :<http://wildlifecontroltraining.com>. Print copies of the NWCTP: Core Principles and Information can be purchased for \$40.00 plus shipping and handling, and the NWCTP: Supplemental Species Information can be purchased for \$60.00 plus shipping. For information on ordering, discounts and specials, contact the School of Natural Resources, Nebraska Maps and More, SNR Map and Publication Store during regular business hours 8 to 5 Central at 101 Hardin Hall, 3310 Holdrege Street, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska 68583-0961, 402-472-3471, Fax 402-472-4608, <http://nebraskamaps.unl.edu>, snrsales@unl.edu.

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